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ABSTRACT

"Newsweek's" article "Why Johnny Can't Write" (Dec. 8, 1975), adopts a "know it all posture" which defies the real evaluation of the statistical decline in language skills among high school graduates. "Newsweek's" attribution of this decline to the presence of television culture and its focusing of blame on structural linguistics and naive educators does not constructively deal with all sides of this complex issue. The intrusion of "omniscient narration" in journalism and throughout our daily lives actually contributes to the problem, and should be replaced by an analytical style which, through the use of irony and metaphor, does not take itself so seriously. (KS)

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SMILE WHEN YOU SAY THAT

Walker Gibson

Address to the English Center of the National Association of Independent Schools, Annual Convention, Boston, February 27, 1976.

I am not here in any official capacity as a representative of the National Council of Teachers of English, but I feel confident that NCTE joins me in bringing you greetings and good wishes from that vast and disparate organization. Many of its members (including, I'm sure, several in this room) teach in the independent schools, but the largest bloc in the Council is composed of people in the public high schools. Those of us from the universities who have become involved in NCTE leadership have learned from the high schools at least as much as we have taught them.

This emphasis in much of NCTE's activities on the secondary classroom ought to mean that the Council has something to offer you, just as you certainly have much to offer it. Our so-called "secondary section" is a strong and relatively independent body within the larger Council, publishes English Journal, and annually sets up its own national conferences on major concerns of the secondary English teacher. Which brings me -- by what you'll agree is a graceful transition -- to the astonishing fact that the secondary section's next big extravaganza will take place right here in Boston, during the first weekend in April. It proposes to address itself to an issue that has to be on the minds of most of us these days -- "Back to Basics" -- and I want to say a little something about that myself very shortly. Meanwhile I hope that at least the locals present will note the first weekend in April on their calendars.

Before leaving this commercial on the beauties of the Council, I should add, perhaps with a note of warning, that NCTE has been engaging lately in actions that are feisty, not to say controversial. Its leadership is possibly a bit to the left of its membership. I'll give three quick examples. A few years ago some of us managed to float an enterprise called Public Doublespeak, calling attention to "public lying" in high places of political and industrial power. The committee charged with this activity has received a staggering amount of notoriety, as you may know, and not all of it has been favorable. Many serious

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teachers nourish important reservations about this committee's work. Another group within the Council recently issued the broadside called "The Students' Right to Their Own Language," and a fair storm has blown up around that too. The question of how to behave toward students with "non-standard" dialects is probably not a practical daily concern for most of you in this room -- as it is not for me. But in the larger context of American education, it's a problem that's not going to go away. Finally, just this past year, NCTE has formed a new arm of its cumbersome body expressly devoted to political action. Called SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English -- that's a euphemism, as I understand it), this separately funded operation is mandated to bring pressure on those forces thought to endanger "free and responsible teaching and learning of English."

About some of these actions of the Council, I'm sure you must have mixed feelings -- but at least they are actions.

And in fact, whether we belong to NCTE or NAIS, whether we work in independent or public schools, in private or public colleges, we share in our different ways the same predicament, in the society that supports us. Currently what we are hearing from that society is precisely the theme that NCTE's secondary section has chosen for its April conference: Back to Boston and Back to Basics. I imagine most of you saw that prominent article in Newsweek last December called "Why Johnny Can't Write." It represents the most formidable public appeal for "back to basics" that I know of, and possibly some of you may have applauded its appearance. Possibly, you might argue, any document so widely circulated that calls attention of any kind to the teaching of writing can be in some sense welcome. Nevertheless, as I hope to begin to show, this is a prejudicial and misleading account of the situation, at least from where I'm standing.

SHOW: 1) cover

2) Andover hard-line precepts

3) last page: ad for TV

Quoting statistics that have recently become so familiar -- declines in verbal SATs and in National Assessment findings -- Newsweek points a finger at the TV culture, at structural linguistics, and at you and me. Here is a typical paragraph:

> In the opinion of many language experts, another major villain is the school of "structural linguistics." Writing is far less important than speech, the structural linguists proclaim, because only about 4 per cent of the world's languages have a written form; they believe that there are no real standards for any language, apart from the way it is commonly spoken. Philologist Pei traces the predominance of this school to the 1961 publication of Webster's Third International Dictionary, the first English dictionary that did not give preference to the way the language is used by its best-educated writers. Since then, he suggests, teachers in the classrooms have come increasingly under the sway of the structural-linguistic dogma: that the spoken word is superior to the written, and that there is no real need for students to study the rules of their language at all.

You would have to look quite hard, I think, to find a linguist of any persuasion who would argue that last clause, at least as it's there phrased. And the loaded language -- proclaim, sway, dogma -- hardly needs to be pointed out to this audience. It is to me distressing to reflect that that one article reached more people -- like school superintendents, school board members, PTA officers, parents -- than a full year's batch of all our professional publications combined. As a like-minded friend of mine wrote me from California: "That sort of thing does more varieties of damage at one swoop than you and I can do or undo in years."

Judging from the letters that appeared in an issue of a couple of weeks later, readers were uniformly enthusiastic about this attack on the sins we have committed in the name of "creativity" (and of course we have committed sins in that name). There was, though, one good letter from a real live linguist at the University of Pennsylvania which, if anyone read it, could have set the record straight on how linguists do in fact look at language:

> Blaming "structural linguistics" for the inability of American students to write good English is like attributing an increase in the occurence of cancer to cancer research.

All schools of linguistics try to describe and analyze language as it is actually used, and most of them distinguish a number of varieties, called "dialects," "codes" or "styles," of English. They do not, however, imply that each of these varieties is appropriate in all situations.

I wrote Newsweek a letter myself, but it was never printed. What I tried to do was not so much to defend you and me (though that too), and not to defend linguists, but to point out how blandly and blindly we all ignore the real force of the electronic culture we live in. Since, as I say, they failed to print the thing, and since you are for the moment a captive audience, I take the liberty of reading you my letter to Newsweek last December, so that it can enjoy one small moment in the sun:

The Editors
Newsweek

People brought up to be comfortable with the written word -- magazine editors like you, English professors like me -- are likely to resist the notion that the act of writing may not be so central after all. It's hard for us to imagine a world where writing is not powerful and respected, where much of the business of the day is managed in other "dialects." No doubt the written word will remain powerful a while longer, but we hardly need to leave the pages of Newsweek to see that there's a whole new scene out there where reading and writing are already archaic arts.

Your arguments, in "Why Johnny Can't Write (December 8), are calculated in part to give comfort to those in distress at this turn of events. "The written language remains," you assure us, "the only effective vehicle for transmitting and debating a culture's ideals, values, and goals." Unfortunately, one needs only to glance at the page directly opposite in order to entertain some doubts about that resounding statement. There it says, in much more impressive type, ANNOUNCING THE MOST ADVANCED COLOR TV IN THE WORLD. "This total engineering concept

reaches its finest expression ..." Did you intend such an ironic juxtaposition?

If there's a book ad in your entire issue, I can't find it.

The article immediately preceding your lament on the "crisis" in writing is titled "Video's New Frontier," and it glowingly reports, quite properly, some brave new riches soon to reach the home viewer. In the face of such goodies, now and in the future, it's really astonishing that writing scores on the various tests have held up as well as they have. Maybe we can thank a lot of hard-working English teachers for that.

Hard-working English teachers are the ones caught in the middle, and they're wrong whatever they do -- at least in somebody's eyes. They can downgrade the traditional pieties about comma splices and spelling, and concentrate on teaching the language as a "creative" act of mind. (Those are your pejorative quotation marks, not mine.) That is a sensible approach being adopted by a growing number of enlightened teachers, but your airy disposal of it shows the kind of hostility such an approach can arouse. On the other hand, one can teach the way you and I were taught, and pound away at that list of Don'ts you so admiringly quote, in pink yet, on page 62. I cannot think that my friends at Andover believe in that kind of thing as devoutly as you do, but in any case, if we want to produce old-fashioned minds with old-fashioned methods, we certainly know how to go about it.

The fact is, English teachers are doing awfully well, against enormous odds, in continuing to involve at least some young people in the joys and powers of reading and writing. You will note in the National Assessment's report -- and you should have noted it in your article -- that among 17-year-olds, "good writers are as good as they were, and there may be a few more of them than there were in 1969." Under the circumstances, that is a truly remarkable achievement.

Meanwhile, if we want to feel the real force of the non-

print media on our culture, all we have to do is scan the pages of Newsweek. It's all there, large as life.

One reason my letter didn't get printed -- not the only reason, I suppose -- is that somehow it got sidetracked in the Newsweek offices. Instead of being routed to the letters editor, it landed on the desk of the lady who actually wrote the article -- one Merrill McL. Sheils. From her I did indeed receive a lengthy reply, two pages single-spaced, signed "Mimi." The style and tone are quite different from her Newsweek voice: defensive, even sensible, without that know-it-all posture so indigenous to our news magazines. As a student of rhetoric I was of course interested by this shift in persona. Here is a characteristic sentence: "Featuring the excerpts from Andover's handbook, incidentally, was merely an artistic device included by our top editors, who have found from long experience that Newsweek readers love to test themselves against such sidebars."

Life is short and I failed to pursue this promising correspondence, but it does remind us that behind those positive and assured voices of the great news media there lurk real human beings who are as much in need of instruction as you and I. In the case before us -- the issue of teaching writing to young Americans -- what is called for above all is not a know-it-all voice, from me or anybody else. In facing that issue I suppose each of us asks a question about our own feelings that can perhaps be simply phrased, for all the complexity of the subject. The question could be: Do I feel that more sins are committed in the name of "creativity" than in the name of standard-English-rigor? Most of us, I imagine, repudiate both extremes, and have staked out for ourselves some middle ground on that scale between Miss-Fidditch's correctness and some excess of humanistic "permissiveness." My suspicion is that in locating ourselves on that scale, we appeal not so much to our education and knowledge as to something deep inside our subconscious personalities. In my own case, as I'm sure is obvious, the claim I stake is somewhat closer to creativity than it is to correctness, but what I hope I also know, in the familiar bromide, is that there's much to be said on both sides. From where I'm sitting, that's the real complaint against the Newsweek piece -- that so much is said on only one side.

Actually what I came to talk with you about today is the know-it-all posture, the positive and assured voice -- not just in journalism but all around us and of course in ourselves as well. Some of you may know my discussion of newswriting in a book called Tough Sweet & Stuffy. There I was speaking particularly of Time Magazine, and I argued that what Time has done is to lift from the genre of fiction the device of the omniscient narrator, and to transpose it -- immorally of course -- to the recording of actual events. (When this occurs self-consciously and good-humoredly in some of the best "new journalism," it can be wonderful.) In any case the omniscient narrator has invaded our lives in many disguises, especially in an election year. What I wanted to discuss with you today are two possible methods I've been thinking about lately, methods for avoiding the temptation of omniscience. Specifically, I'd like to say something about irony, and about metaphor.

The remarkable thing about irony and metaphor is that they both say things that aren't true. In both cases there flows an unspoken communication between speaker and listener, avowing that the things we say aren't (exactly) so. If someone calls me a silly fool, I answer "Smile when you say that" -- for the smile will show that he means it ironically, or at least that he concedes an exaggeration. Say it isn't so. If he doesn't smile, of course, if he really means it, that's war. Someone else calls me a bright gleam in the lamp of learning, and he smiles when he says that, reminding me he knows it's a metaphor, and ludicrous at that. Even our most solemn and prestigious literary metaphors, I'd argue (or at least, smiling, I'd argue for a while) have a touch of mutually appreciated comedy, an implicit understanding that we're talking nonsense.

Let us go then, you and I.
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table.

Along with the notorious foreboding of that particular description of an evening sky, isn't there a common understanding of the absolute absurdity of that figure? As if the speaker were saying: You will understand that this is a way of talking; you will at least understand that first and foremost, literally, I am telling it like it isn't.

Our appreciation of both irony and metaphor begins with an act of nay-saying. Kenneth Burke has proposed that the ability to use the negative is one of the distinguishing characteristics of humanity. If so, we are intensely human as we respond to both these turns of language, where an act of saying No comes first.

Wayne Booth's fine new book on the subject, A Rhetoric of Irony, begins with a homely and unliterary example. Booth and his friend stand together looking out the window. It's pouring. The friend says, "Think it'll rain?"

Booth's understanding of this little sally requires, as in all instances of what he calls Stable Irony, four distinguishable steps:

1. Surface meaning is nonsense, since it is raining.
2. Alternatives: he hasn't noticed the rain-impossible-or he is cracking up-unlikely-or he's kidding.
3. I decode that he cannot not know that it's raining.
4. I construct a meaning in harmony with that decision: his words mean "hello my good friend who understands me is it not a rainy day that we are enduring together by making something mildly humorous out of what might otherwise have been reason for grousing it is good to see you who thank God understand ironic joshing when you hear it and are not too critical even if it is rather stale and feeble."

These four steps -- often instantaneous in practice, of course -- can be applied to literary ironies at all levels of sophistication: Swift, Austen, Beckett. And the camaraderie thus achieved is a very precious human experience. "The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumed my capacity for dealing with it, and -- most important -- because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built."

A similar snaring, a smiling sharing, occurs with metaphor, and again it begins with nay-saying. An evening sky is not a patient on a table. The difference, as Booth has also suggested, lies in what happens next. With irony, we respond by denying the given assertion and finding

another that fits the circumstances. With metaphor, we respond by finding some sense in which the proposition can after all be accepted. (With simile we get a little help, the admonishment "like.") I see what you mean, the evening sky can be seen as sort of like a patient etherised, insofar as . . .

In any event each of these great flourishes can boast a distinguished history, and generations of critics and rhetoricians have claimed for one or the other a central role in communication and in art. Yet both demand this fundamental act of nay-saying, a recognition that somebody is telling it like it isn't. (There's irony for you!) How explain the honorable prestige enjoyed by these modes of expression, when in fact they're so indirect and roundabout, untruthful, tricky, playful, and maybe even elitist?

It is precisely because irony and metaphor relinquish the claim of telling it like it is, that the sensible writer is so taken up with their power. For we all know what language can't do. Language can't tell it like it is, and the sensible writer acts accordingly. He smiles when he says that. How better to act than to assert through the very choice of one's rhetoric the concession that the true state of things is beyond words? I want my language to tell you in its very construction that I'm trying not to assert more than I can know.

Socrates was very good at this, and when in the Phaedrus he addresses himself to defining the soul, he begins this way: "To tell what the soul really is would be a matter for utterly superhuman and long discourse, but it is within human power to describe it briefly in a figure; let us then speak in that way." And he goes on to invoke the famous image of the charioteer and the two contending horses.

Irony and metaphor -- conscious, deliberate metaphor -- are both techniques by which we lower the pretension-level of our voices. They are gestures of humility. Furthermore, awareness of our own dead metaphors can reduce our fanciest notions to the little human acts from which all things come. The word metaphor is of course itself a dead metaphor; someone somewhere imagined a connection that was. I cannot handle abstract ideas at all without, at some level, engaging myself in the world of elementary human activities. I cannot handle abstract ideas at all without, at some level, engaging myself in the world of elementary human activities.

For you and me as English teachers, it seems to me the great trick, if we can bring it off, is to show our students that they are already deeply involved in irony and metaphor, in every dialogue of their daily lives. Not only involved, but good at it: the ironic jokes and analogies that are part of youth's patois function as reminders of the limited claims of the speaker. They smile when they say that. But when they write, under our encouragement, those little exegeses of "Prufrock" or those little sermons on Crime In America, they become solemn, pretentious, and deadly. As we all know. Are we, in sum, teaching them to write like Newsweek?

I don't mean to overlook the difficulties of teaching people to smile when they write that. I can't do it any better than you can. But for what it's worth, I am determined to try a little harder, with my students and with myself, to encourage the uses of irony and metaphor as escape-hatches from the know-it-all voice. (Don't tell me it won't work -- I know it won't work.) And I'm going to try to convey to my students, and anybody else who'll listen, my invigorated respect for those two old rhetorical war-horses, irony and metaphor. Of course they should concern us. They offer us what salvation there is.